DEFEATING ANXIETY
Matthew 6:19-21; 24-34
November 16, 1980

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Responsive Reading 62...

> Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth; Where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven; Where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal; for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also. No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say unto you, Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than the food, and the body more than the raiment? Behold the birds of the heaven, that they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not ye of much more value than they? Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit unto the measure of his life? And why are ye anxious concerning raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven; Shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Be not therefore anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the Gentiles seek; for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Be not therefore anxious for the morrow; for the morrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

Jesus painted a beautiful picture in that passage - all the poetic words about carefree birds and happy flowers and the glory of King Solomon. But don't let the poetry and the beauty disguise the fact that Jesus is saying something very upsetting: He expects us to live by these words! He expects us to find a pattern for daily living in this pretty picture! And it would be awfully nice, wouldn't it? But unfortunately our lives are filled with some very practical realities - responsibilities and obligations and planning ahead and providing. The carefree life of birds and flowers is very appealing, but it isn't at all practical.

After all, we do have very real cares and worries. We worry whether we will be able to keep earning enough to meet those huge monthly mortgage payments. In a way, a thirty-year, high interest mortgage really is for the birds, but the fact is that sparrows and robins don't have to worry about house payments. And there are college expenses; the flowers don't have to worry about educating their children. Parents worry about what kind of persons their children are growing into. Wife worries about her husband's long hours and health. The student worries about examinations and school grades. The aging person worries about inadequate pension, about fixed income in the midst of raging inflation, about hospital costs, about the approach of life's end. Worries and anxieties surround us and threaten to overcome us.

We have just narrowly survived a national election campaign which drummed over and over again on the theme of anxiety. We are anxious about national security. More bombs and bombers is one proposed solution. We fear running out of energy and more oil wells and less environment concern are proposed. Worried about the job market or about business profits? Increased production of war material will help there, we have been told. So we have voted resoundingly and a new administration is preparing to take over

the reins. But does anyone really feel we can relax now, that our worries are all over? I note that the stock market rose tremendously on the day after the election, one of the strongest trading days ever, I understand - surely a highly optimistic note. But the next day the market fell almost exactly as sharply as it had risen. Obviously, the burden of anxiety is still with us.

There are some who think of religion, think of the church, as a place of refuge from it all, a way to forget for a little while. Here we can escape problems by immersing ourselves in music and prayer and uplifitng thoughts. Using worship each week to rest from life's realities may not change reality, but it makes us feel good for a time. That is what Karl Marx accused us of, you know. He said, "Religion is the opium of the people."

But, Karl Marx aside, if we are doing that, we are missing the real point. Christ teaches us to confront our cares and our fears, not to avoid or escape. Consider the reality of Jesus: He who taught about God's caring for birds and flowers is the same one who faced more bitter reality, more pain and suffering and grief, than any of us will ever confront. That is the kind of person who teaches that God cares for us. This Christ, who was killed by the cruelty of the world - this is the one who teaches us to overcome our anxieties and fears.

Now, look at the process, the method to overcome anxiety. First, Jesus says, there is a decision to be made, a commitment to be given wholeheartedly: Where will we invest ourselves, our energies? "Do not save riches here on earth...(but) in heaven...For your heart will always be where your riches are." "No one can serve two masters."

It is an old story how in medieval times, when Christianity advanced into northern Europe, a ruler - a king or duke or prince - would be converted and then declare that all his subjects must immediately become Christians. Sometimes the ruler would lead his whole army through a river in a mass baptism by immersion. However, the soldiers were instructed to walk through the water with their right arms held high and dry. Their souls would be dedicated to God alright, but their unbaptized right arms could still use a sword in the ruler's service.

Our story may be like that. We pledge loyalty to God, but hold back some areas of life, some destructive habit, some driving ambition, or some desired luxury remains unbaptized, uncommitted. So we try to serve God with half our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Maybe we think about it like this: "Certainly, Jesus is <u>one</u> of the leaders we can use. A lot of what He says sounds real nice, but His advice just isn't very practical when it comes to the nuts and bolts of life." So, then we look elsewhere for more "realistic" guidance. A compromise.

Our Old Testament emphasizes that the God of Jews and Christians is alone among ancient gods in this matter: He would not stand for rivals. <u>No</u> compromise. This is the God who said on Mt. Sinai: "You shall have no other gods before me...For I the Lord your God am a jealous God..." This God reigns while the compromise gods of antiquity are forgotten. And when people today offer Him only a part of their allegiance, they are completely denying the exclusive loyalty He demands.

"No man can serve two masters..." Notice how Jesus puts the issue specifically: "You cannot serve God and mammon." The Greek word "Mammonas", or "Mammon" in old English, means wealth of every kind. Call it profit, money, financial gain, material possessions, the almighty dollar. All are accepted translations.

That is awfully pointed for us. It would have been so much nicer if Jesus had said, "You cannot serve God and Caesar." Or "God and the Pharisees." Then we could happily nod our agreement. But Jesus puts it so we cannot dodge. He hits us in our sorest spot.

We can be pretty obvious about it all. How often have we heard that the basic foundation of our society is the profit motive? If it really is, then Jesus plainly says we are headed for damnation: "You cannot serve God and money."

Of course, as individuals we don't really think that we rely on possessions and wealth and profit to make life meaningful. But we will go so far as to say we are looking for security. Security - isn't that the key word in our struggle to overcome anxiety? National security, economic security, personal security - we are anxious that our security might be pulled out from under us.

Theologian Roger Shinn points out that "security" is a perfectly good translation of "mammon". You cannot serve God and security. And how we struggle to achieve security! Substantial homes with even more substantial mortgages, glittering automobiles which may not outlast the loans on them, tightly-scheduled frantic lives, beneficial social contacts, highly conservative politics, constantly acquiring more and more possessions - all are symbolic of the security blanket we clutch. And all the while there is no more anxiety-ridden part of our society then the affluent neighborhoods where you and I live. Those who focus on security remain the most insecure within.

If the answer to anxiety, then, is not money or profit or material security, what is? The lilies of the field? Marx and Engels wrote this sarcastic commentary: "Yes, consider the lilies of the field, how they are eaten by goats, transplanted by man into his button-hole." We don't like Marx and Engels, but they make a point.

So we must be realistic, right? We count on our own achievements. Maybe God can feed and clothe us, but look how much better and more reliable a job modern agriculture and industry do. At least, usually.

But the haunting words of Jesus will not quite leave us. As we think further, we realize that He knew something about life. He met disappointments. He knew all about injustice. He yearned to escape a cruel death and didn't get His own way. And His teaching was preserved for us by disciples who also knew the hard side of life, including their own torture and persecution. They must have seen something in His promises that we don't see as clearly.

Partly we are confused because we read in some things Jesus did not say. There are several things He clearly does not mean. He is not downgrading the need for hard work. He was a carpenter himself. Jesus did not condemn wise planning. One of His parables says that before a person starts a project he should plan ahead so he will be able to complete it well. (Luke 14:28-30). Jesus is not patting us on the back saying, "Don't worry. Everything will come out all right." He knew that doesn't always happen, especially not in the short run. He is not saying that God will step in to correct all our errors and omissions.

There is an especially evil interpretation sometimes put on this flowers-and-birds passage, that it is an argument against the need for do-gooders: "We don't have to worry about needy people - Jesus said God will take care of them." But to say God will take care of people is not to say that we aren't responsible to help those in need. There was a young boy who had very little food and no shoes. A thoughtless woman asked him a cruel question: "If God really loved you, little boy, wouldn't He send you food and shoes?" The boy made the right answer: "Lady, God did send them with someone, but that person forgot to deliver them to me."

Now we can see what Jesus does say. He tells us that our destinies are controlled by the God who stands forever. He tells us we are feeble, so helpless we determine neither our birth nor our death, but that if we trust in God, we tie our feebleness to the eternal power and purpose. He tells us that if the goal of our life is to keep the stomach expanding and the pocketbook flush and the heart beating, we all fail before long. No one gets out of this life without dying. Christ tells us that in our anxiety we are always looking to our ways and not to the goals of God, who has His own ways for us. Therefore, Jesus tells us to seek first God's kingdom and we will be given all that we need - not immunity to hunger and pain and death, but confidence to surmount them.

In one of Martin Luther's darkest hours he was confronted by a bishop who threatened him with all the awesome power of the pope - excommunication and damnation and death. "Then, Martin Luther," thundered the bishop, "where will a wretched worm like you be?" Luther replied quietly, "Then as now, in the hands of almighty God."

That's the kind of confidence Jesus teaches, the defeat of anxiety. How did Martin Luther achieve that defeat? History tells his story clearly: He first realized that God's love was given fully to him regardless of his imperfections. And then Luther lived out the rest of his life as if nothing was more important than working, serving, laboring to advance that love. In the midst of threats of failure and death, Luther beat anxiety by embodying the words of Jesus: "Set your mind on God's kingdom and His justice before anything else, and all the rest will come to you as well."

That does not mean you can defeat life's anxiety by becoming a minister, a preacher. I tell you with deep feeling: There is no guarantee in that. Nor does serving God's kingdom require everyone to accept heavy responsibilities in running the church or to completely overturn one's life and become some sort of religion groupie. Serving God's kingdom must come right where we live and work and play and share. That is the way to conquer anxiety and fear.

Eight hundred years ago a monk named Francis put that way of life into prayer form. It is printed in the bulletin as our unison prayer. How to serve God's kingdom and defeat anxiety? By living the words we now pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light,
And where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much
Seek to be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.
(St. Francis of Assisi).